

Fairfax County's Town Meetings Give Minorities a Voice in the Criminal Justice System

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How is the criminal justice system perceived by minorities? Do minorities believe that the system is fair? In Los Angeles, these questions were raised dramatically in the riots following the Rodney King decision. In Fairfax County, Virginia, the chief judge of the circuit court, the Honorable Richard J. Jamborsky, inspired county leaders to seek proactively for answers to such questions rather than wait to see if civil unrest would occur. Following Judge Jamborsky's suggestion, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors asked one of its advisory bodies, the Criminal Justice Policy Group, to determine minorities' perceptions of the criminal justice system and its fairness.

The Criminal Justice Policy Group, chaired by Sheriff Carl Peed, consists of the heads of all criminal justice agencies in the county. The group immediately appointed representatives to develop a plan for what the board of supervisors had called a "symposium" on the criminal justice system.

County Population Shifts

Fairfax County, Virginia, once a suburban bedroom community in the metropolitan area surrounding Washington, D.C., is now a rapidly growing urban area with its own business and employment centers and a population approaching 1,000,000.

Between the 1980 and 1990 censuses and continuing today, the population of minorities in Fairfax County has been growing much more rapidly than the white population or the population as a whole. African-Americans now constitute some 8 percent of the population; Asians, 9 percent; and Hispanics, 7 percent. Asians tend to be under-represented in the criminal justice system, but African-Americans and Hispanics are over-represented: Hispanics make up about 14 percent of the inmate population of the Adult Detention Center and African-Americans about 30 percent.

Citizen Involvement

The planning committee, led by Sheriff Peed, soon realized that if the group wanted to hear what the minority populations of the county felt about the criminal justice system, the meeting could not be called a symposium. Officials from the criminal justice system needed to listen, not make speeches. Moreover,

the meeting could not be held in the courthouse; the system needed to reach out into the communities and hear from people in their own neighborhoods. The committee also needed help from the minority groups themselves, to assist in publicizing the plans and in getting people to attend.

Thus, the committee started calling the effort "Town Meetings on the Fairness of the Criminal Justice System" and planned to hold five to ten such meetings around the county. It began to reach out to community groups of all kinds for help in planning and organizing the town meetings.

What had been thought of as a fairly simple symposium had turned into a complex operation. Before long, nearly 100 citizens, along with a large number of criminal justice staff members, were involved in planning for the town meetings. There were local task forces working on the arrangements for each town meeting, a large central committee overseeing planning, and subcommittees working on a format for the meetings and on public relations.

Many who participated in the planning process believe that the number and variety of persons involved **may** have brought about the most

powerful and longest-lasting effect of the town meetings. Participants came from all parts of the county and included representatives of a number of ethnic groups, social welfare groups, church groups, victims' groups, mental health, and women's groups, as well as general citizen organizations and county and state agencies. Many of the citizens

people attended, and they wanted to go on discussing the issues when it was time to stop.

What Did We Learn?

As this article is being written, we are still analyzing the findings from the town meetings. One thing we are sure of is that most people do not

understand the criminal justice system very well but, given the right opportunity, are eager to learn more about it. We also need to find

better ways to

educate our immigrant populations about American laws. We should not have to put people in jail to teach them that public drinking, drunk driving, abusing spouses or children, or leaving young children alone are not acceptable behaviors in this country.

Perhaps 200 citizens who had not been involved in the planning and were not part of the criminal justice system attended the meetings. We believe this number suggests that there is no large ground swell of unrest among Fairfax County's minority citizens. However, we did hear criticisms and will be working on ways to address the problems we learned about.

Changes in Fairfax County's criminal justice system will include:

- getting more and better interpreter services throughout the system;

- improving the jury system;
- hiring more minority and bi-cultural employees in all agencies; and
- training all employees in multi-cultural awareness and sensitivity.

We have already seen some useful outcomes. During the course of the town meetings, new magistrates were hired, including an African-American and a multi-lingual Laotian, who had learned about the openings during the planning process.

Whatever the final outcome, the process has been as important as the product. The value of a small group discussion in a rearranged elementary school classroom, where a judge, a prosecutor, a sheriff, and a clerk of the court sit down in a circle with African-American, Hispanic, and Asian victims, defendants, recovering drug addicts, and ordinary citizens to talk about fairness in the criminal justice system and to listen to their neighbors cannot be matched by any textbook analyses or paper polls.

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who took part have said they want to go on meeting and to stay involved with helping the criminal justice system address its problems and communicate with its constituents.

Meeting Format

Ultimately, six town meetings were held, each with the same format. Following a brief presentation about the criminal justice process, participants were divided into discussion groups with a trained leader; a trained recorder, and a set of discussion questions that each group was asked to consider.

One meeting, held in an area with a high concentration of Hispanics, was conducted completely in Spanish. Feeling that Hispanics can be reluctant to confront authority figures, the Hispanic organizers of this meeting were afraid no one would come. However, between forty and sixty